

## The Odds in Hitchhiking<sup>1</sup>

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No hitchhiker endures the glare of the sun, withstands a downpour, or eats the dust of the road without wondering what he might do to increase the probability that the approaching vehicle will provide a ride. Hitchhikers maintain about as much superstition and consistency in their mannerisms as do "crap-shooters." At times they wear a lonely, dejected, destitute look; at other times it's a soul-searching, wide-eyed stare; and at still other times they adopt a friendly, carefree smile. Signs showing a hitchhiker's destination, a handful of books suggestive of a student traveler, and a suitcase or duffle bag are other techniques hitchhikers may try to use to their advantage. But the fact remains: bumming a ride simply has not yet become a science. It is an area of social psychology which has been neglected by researchers.

The suspicion and stigma typically accorded a hitchhiker appears to be diminishing. Our never-ending highway parades of single and double-occupied cars all headed in similar directions has become dissonance-provoking for many an ecologist and financially disadvantaged traveler. When public transportation vehicles fill less than 20% of their capacity, we anticipate railroad ties being torn up, bus routes altered, and time schedules adjusted. Yet the two-car family is gradually evolving into a three-car family and a fully occupied automobile is about as rare as pollution-free exhaust.

In the interest of economy and ecology (and in the interest of those individuals who use either as a motive for hitchhiking) we experimentally examined what we thought were some of the most salient aspects of this form of

travel. Obviously there are many reasons why some individuals pick up hitchhikers and others don't, and why those who do pick up hitchhikers stop for some and pass others by. Social psychologists have shown that people who have characteristics in common tend to attract one another (Richardson, 1940; Goodnow & Tagiuri, 1952; Byrne, 1961). But, needless to say, the motorist doesn't interview the hitchhiker prior to offering him a lift. Physical appearance and general attire, therefore, may be crucial factors--they are undoubtedly the most obvious cues a driver receives and probably a major basis on which he decides whether the bystander is a poor, fair, or good traveling mate.

Another cue available to most perceptive motorists is the hitchhiker's sex. There is no reason to believe that sex bias is less likely to be found in hitchhiking than in employment, promotion policies, college admissions, or similar situations (Clifford & Looft, 1971; Walster, Cleary, and Clifford, 1971). Unlike these areas, however, women probably enjoy an advantage over men when it comes to thumbing a ride.

In addition to attire and sex, the number of hitchhikers in a group may influence the motorist's decision: a single individual will probably have a different effect from that of three people each carrying a dog. Sex, attire, and companionship are not the only factors which are likely to determine the odds of being a successful hitchhiker, but we decided to limit our initial study to the examination of these variables.

Our design was a simple one: male and female hitchhikers dressed in either sports attire or grubbies<sup>2</sup> would hitchhike alone or with a partner. Their success would be gauged by the number of cars which stopped to offer a ride. Thus, with the assistance of two male and two female students each with their two costumes we compared the following eight hitchhiking situations:

Sports Attire

Grubbies

- |                             |                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Male alone (M)           | 5. Male alone         |
| 2. Male with female (M&F)   | 6. Male with female   |
| 3. Male with male (M&M)     | 7. Male with male     |
| 4. Female with female (F&F) | 8. Female with female |

Since traffic varies considerably on different highways, we conducted this entire study with the use of only two highways; each of the eight conditions was tested for one hour on each road. To avoid confounding our results with the effects of rush-hour and week-end traffic, we worked only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 A.M. and 1:00 and 3:00 P.M. To control for the effect weather might have had, we chose comparably pleasant days.

During the testing period every passing vehicle (excluding busses and taxies) was recorded on a digital counter which the hitchhiker concealed in his hand. Each motorist who stopped was greeted with, "Hi! Thanks for offering a ride, but we are just conducting a study on hitchhiking and would like to know your age, occupation, and whether you pick up most hitchhikers or just a few." Responses to these inquiries were recorded and drivers were thanked for their assistance and handed a 3" x 5" card which read:



Hello!  
 Thank you for stopping. We are conducting a survey on hitchhiking, <sup>and we</sup> are trying to find out whether ~~and~~ <sup>physical appearance</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>behavior</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>behavior</sup> influences one's ability to get a ride. We hope that you were not inconvenienced or annoyed by our ~~and~~ <sup>behavior</sup>. Thank you very much for your cooperation, and please do not hesitate to stop for other hitchhikers as this is the only area where this study is being conducted.

Have a Nice Day!

We had expected that an individual would be offered rides more frequently than a pair of hitchhikers, and that females would be favored over a male and

female couple, who in turn would have an advantage over two males. We made no specific prediction on attire. For, although we were inclined to believe sports clothes would ordinarily be more effective than grubbies, our study was conducted on the outskirts of a university town where we assumed student drivers would be numerous and less discriminating than non-student drivers. In accordance with research cited previously, however, we did expect to find a difference in the type of driver offering rides to grubby-attired and sports-attired hitchhikers.

Based on the ratio of cars stopping to cars passing we computed the probability of a motorist offering a ride under each of our eight conditions. The results are shown in Figure 1. Our data indicated that females have an advantage over males, and one hitchhiker is better off than a pair. Contrary to our expectations, attire seems to play an important role even in a college-community setting: sports clothing seems to give more mileage than grubbies.

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Insert Figure 1  
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It should be emphasized at this point that the appearance of the hitchhikers in the different clothing conditions was not nearly as divergent as it might have been--and often is among hitchhikers. We are quite certain that had we contrasted grubbier clothes with more formal dress, the effects of the two attires would have been more dramatic.

An incident which occurred during the course of this study seems to reinforce this speculation: While one of our male experimenters dressed in grubbies was collecting data, a genuine hitchhiker stationed in front of him appeared to be having no success. The unkempt appearance of this traveler with his beard, long hair, dirty, torn jacket and backpack was undoubtedly more representative of an extreme "grubbie." Obviously perplexed by the odd behavior

of our bogus hitchhiker (who appeared to have turned down at least seven rides within a half hour), he trudged down the road and asked in complete disgust, "Hey man, what's your problem? You waiting for a ride to your \_\_\_\_\_ living room?" The frustrated hitchhiker then explained that he had waited three hours in vain for a ride and was giving up and returning to town.

Even though our two clothing conditions did not represent the extremes of attire, there was an observed difference in the number of rides offered, and in the type of drivers who stopped. Where as 54% of the motorists who stopped for our grubby experimenters admitted they picked up most hitchhikers, 44% of those who stopped for our sports-attired experimenters made a similar claim.

The careful reader might have noticed by now that the design of the experiment is incomplete; the effects of a female hitchhiking alone were not examined. Although we had originally intended to study this condition, we felt somewhat inhibited by circumstances: Our two females hitchhiking in sports attire appeared to be attracting such an inordinately large number of rides that a state trooper warned the girls about "disrupting traffic." In anticipation of the traffic jams a single woman hitchhiker may have caused and the resulting difficulty in recording data, we decided to terminate the study without completing single female conditions.

It is unlikely that the results of this experiment differ radically from popular expectation. It is also unlikely that the results will prompt college students to reach for sports coats and ties or dresses and heels the next time they head for the road. Nor is it expected that hitchhiking dates will become a new fad. Among other things, however, this study has identified an additional area of social behavior in which decisions tend to be made on the basis of sex. On the surface it appears the female has an advantage over the male--an uncommon finding in sex bias research--but, it must be emphasized that number of rides

offered was our dependent measure; there was no measure of intent or motivation on the part of the driver. In addition to the humanitarian motorists who willingly share their vehicles, females probably attracted a number of chauvinists. The latter may have accounted for the "advantage" experienced by our women experimenters.

In general, this study suggests that the prospects for hitchhikers may not be too bad. At no time in any condition did our experimenters receive fewer than six offers in an hour. At times as many as 16 and 18 cars stopped during a single 60-minute period. For travelers who have lingered in vain hour upon hour in anticipation of bumming a ride, it might be advantageous to invest in a hitchhiking outfit. Treat it like a "Sunday Best;" it will not only go a long way but might prove to be the most economical clothing investment in a wardrobe of grubbies.

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The authors thank the sunburnt students who helped conduct this study.

<sup>2</sup>"Sports clothes" implies dresses for the girls and slacks and pressed shirts for the boys. "Grubbies" consist of jeans or cut-offs with t-shirts for both sexes.

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